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ABSTRACT

The drastic actions that have been taken in the District of Columbia public schools offer many lessons for those interested in urban school reform. In November 1996, the District of Columbia's federally appointed financial control board took over the school system, firing the superintendent and replacing the elected school board with an appointed board of trustees. A retired Army general, Julius W. Becton, was brought in to run the schools. Sixteen months later, there was little to show for Becton's tenure, but his successor remained committed to following through on the get-tough approach. As in many other school systems, testing has been used for accountability purposes. Threats of summer school and teacher firings have created a tense atmosphere in the District of Columbia schools, and test preparation has become the primary focus. Local activists think that threatening and punitive measures are not contributing to school improvement in the District of Columbia. Instead, activists call for staff development, a counselor and social worker in every school, smaller class sizes, and books for every student. This theme issue also contains an overview of the history of District of Columbia public schools. (SLD)

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Where Does 'Getting Tough' Get Us? A Look at the DC Public Schools Crisis

Action for Better Schools

Newsletter of the National Coalition of Education Activists

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Action FOR BETTER SCHOOLS

Newsletter of the National Coalition of Education Activists

VOL. 5/NO. 4
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Where Does 'Getting Tough' Get Us?

A LOOK AT THE DC PUBLIC SCHOOLS CRISIS

In cities from Philadelphia, PA, to Birmingham, AL, politicians are increasingly calling for drastic action to overhaul inadequate school systems. In our nation's capital, where many NCEA members will be gathering for a conference in late July, the drastic actions that have been taken in the last two years can teach us much about emerging approaches to systemwide reform.

In November, 1996, the District of Columbia's federally appointed financial control board reacted to the ongoing crisis in Washington's public schools by taking over the school system. They fired the superintendent, replaced the elected school board with an appointed board of trustees and brought in Julius W. Becton, Jr., a retired Army general, to run the schools.

Too many school change efforts ignore students' needs.

Becton, frequently described as a "no-nonsense" leader, promised a "business approach" and put employees on notice that slackers "should seek employment elsewhere." Sixteen months later, this spring, with little to show for his tenure and new evidence of financial mismanagement emerging, Becton resigned. But his deputy and successor, Arlene Ackerman, is committed to following through on his get-tough approach.

See Page 10 for a Short History of DC Schools

DC is not alone in advocating "getting tough" with failing schools. Both Seattle and Boulder have also recently brought in military men to lead their school districts. In a number of other communities including Cleveland, Baltimore, and Newark, higher levels of government have taken over the management of local school districts (see box on p. 4). And with "accountability" as the buzzword, many other struggling school districts are turning to the same kinds of strategies being advanced in DC schools:

- ***a top-down decision-making process***
- ***frequent, high-stakes, standardized testing***
- ***the threat that staff will lose their jobs if test scores don't improve***
- ***mandatory summer school and the threat of grade retention for low-scoring students***
- ***cuts in programs that address students' social and emotional well-being, such as arts, music, and conflict resolution***

Most people familiar with urban school systems agree that a radical shakeup is needed and that higher expectations are a critical starting point. But the "get-tough" approach, by relying so heavily on punitive and

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WASHINGTON'S SCHOOLS IN BRIEF

The District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) have a pre-k through 12th grade enrollment of 77,000 students.

- ***Nearly one-third of DC children under 16 live in poverty.***
- ***Four out of 10 students drop out before earning a diploma.***
- ***Three-fourths of the students in the elementary schools qualify for free school lunch.***
- ***25% of the elementary school population is welfare-dependent.***

These conditions exist in a city that has among the nation's highest per capita income and wealth (for African Americans and whites), as well as above-average rates of educational attainment. African American children comprise 87% of D.C. public school students; Latino 7%, white 4%, Asian 1%, and Native American and others 1%.

The DCPS system has been at the forefront in providing early childhood education. DCPS offers a full day pre-kindergarten for about half of all eligible four year-olds and full-day kindergarten for all five year-olds. There are also individual schools, and programs within schools throughout the city that offer students an innovative, high quality education. But these exemplary programs are far and away outnumbered by schools where principals, teachers, and students barely get by. Some of this story is revealed in test score results. Thirty-four percent of DCPS eighth graders scored "below basic" in reading and 72% scored below basic in math in the Spring 1997 Stanford 9 Achievement Tests. Scoring below basic indicates that students showed little or no mastery of fundamental knowledge and skills at their grade level.

DC PUBLIC SCHOOLS CRISIS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

undemocratic measures, conveys a disregard for students' needs and a lack of respect for children and their families, as well as school staff.

"We need honest school improvement that acknowledges both high standards and a high quality of school input," commented Asa Hilliard, professor of urban education at Georgia State University, in a recent speech at Howard University in Washington. "To establish the standards of output without having standards of input is a travesty… an abandonment of the responsibility of adults for the education and socialization of children."

Besides a lack of supports for schools, there is a lack of attention to issues of equity in this get-tough approach.

"The playing field is not even. Still the greatest predictor of school success is income," added Maurice Sykes, a DC education activist and former school administrator. "The failure of our school system is its pretending that there is a level playing field when kids come to school." Inequities in resources and in the distribution of effective teachers within the district and between city and suburbs are at the heart of the problem and are rarely addressed by accountability plans.

Testing, Testing

As in many other school districts, "getting tough" in Washington, DC has meant a system of high-stakes testing which puts the fate of students and the jobs of hundreds of teachers on the line. Three times since last spring, Washington students have taken the Stanford 9 test. This school year, students in grades 1-11 have been tested twice in reading and math, in October and April. The test is costly to administer — last October's test cost $760,000

PHOTO © RICK REINHARD

(*Education Week*, 11/26/97) — and consumes days of class time.

From data collected last fall, the District labeled 21 schools as inadequate. In any of those 21 schools, if results show that student test scores did not improve by 10% on the April tests, staff members will have to reapply for their jobs. At least half of the staff at schools with insufficient progress must be fired or re-assigned to other schools. In a system that has historically been riddled with mismanagement, bureaucracy, and waste at the central office level, it is easy for school staff to feel the accountability program singles them out as the scapegoats for the system's failure.

Meanwhile, students are being threatened with summer school and the prospect of repeating a grade. The District has called for an end to the social promotion of students and made preparations for mandatory summer school for 20,000 youth, more than a quarter of the District's student population. To avoid having to go to summer school, Washington students in grades 1 through 11 will have to score 90 percent of the minimal score needed to reach the "basic" level on the math and reading tests.

To be promoted, elementary school students who do poorly on the tests must have good grades or succeed in summer school. Secondary students will be promoted as long as they pass

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their classes but will still be recommended for summer school if they score poorly on the Stanford 9.

A mandatory summer school plan was tried in Chicago last summer, and the $34 million program was hailed by Chicago school officials as a success. But only one-third of 40,000 low-scoring students had passed the test by summer's end.

Summer school does meet a serious need for additional instructional time, but can it work when used as a catch-all for struggling students? Or will many students end up being told to repeat a grade — a measure which is increasingly recognized as problematic? Many DC parents see the summer school plan as unfairly punishing children for the failures of an inadequate system and question how much learning will go on in the hot weather. In a District experiencing a severe budget crisis, the $10 million cost of summer school also threatens to cause deeper budget cuts in other areas.

Climate of fear

Threats of summer school and teacher firings have created a tense, pressure-cooker atmosphere in Washington schools. Test preparation has become the primary focus. Teachers have turned to test-taking booklets, along with daily drills and tutorials, to pull themselves and their students through.

"Schools are gearing their academic program to the test," said Mary Filardo, a DC parent activist and director of the 21st Century Schools Fund. "Kids are taking practice tests over and over again. I don't know of a school that hasn't felt a need to narrow their program to prepare for the test."

Subjects like art and music have become expendable because what is paramount is performance on reading and math tests. "All the quality of life issues that should be getting attention in schools are going by the board," Filardo added.

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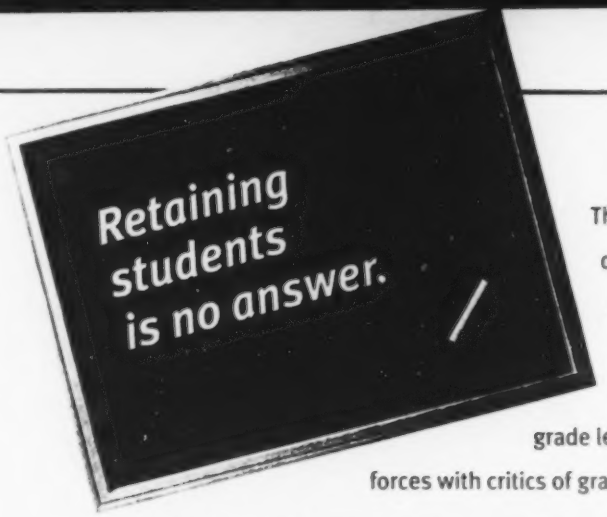

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), long a critic of the social promotion of students who are not working at grade level, has now also joined forces with critics of grade retention.

"Neither social promotion nor retention is an adequate response to student underachievement... because neither requires change in pedagogy, content or curriculum," comments the Fall 1997 AFT report *Passing on Failure.* "Nevertheless, throughout the twentieth century the education pendulum has swung between these two policy alternatives."

The AFT study points out that students "often do not significantly improve their academic skills as a result of being retained, but instead may become alienated from school" and be at greater risk of dropping out.

Other critics of grade retention suggest that the decision to retain is often made haphazardly and for nonacademic reasons, with boys, students of color, and low-income children singled out unfairly.

An AFT survey found that few school districts have developed policies mandating assistance to students in danger of failing. Fewer than 60% of the districts surveyed mandate parental notification that students are in danger of failing. Only 15 percent of districts have policies calling for tutoring and only 13 percent mention alternative programs such as transitional classes, individualized plans, additional instructional time, or supportive social services.

In offering solutions to the promotion-retention dilemma, the AFT calls for:

- ***high-quality preschool and kindergarten programs,***
- ***reduced class size in the early grades,***
- ***improved reading instruction and teacher training in reading,***
- ***timely intervention with students who are falling behind.***

Passing on Failure: District Promotion Policies and Practices *is available for $5 from the American Federation of Teachers, Order Department, 555 New Jersey Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20001.*

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DC PUBLIC SCHOOLS CRISIS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

Year after year, budget cuts have also whittled away at other "extras" like art, music, sports, and conflict resolution programs, but notably, a program that has emerged unscathed is one that gets tough with youth — Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC). The DC school system pays well over half a million dollars to run the program, promoted by the Pentagon as a vehicle for providing increased school discipline and leadership training. JROTC "cadets" are taught by retired military officers and spend class time learning military history, drill, and at many schools, rifle marksmanship. The concern for high academic standards doesn't seem to apply to JROTC. Teachers do not have to be certified, and the curriculum and textbooks are controlled by the Department of Defense.

JROTC has expanded to 2,700 high schools nationwide and has aimed its recent expansion at urban areas and school districts with high concentrations of youth of color, from Baltimore to Honolulu. Former DC administrator Sykes said he sees JROTC being sold to schools as the easy answer to the question, "How do you socialize children of poverty?" He explained, "If you don't have access to summer camp, to after-school athletics, clubs, or other activities, this [JROTC] is what you're offered."

Standards Not Enough

Local activists see the threatening and punitive measures as akin to wielding a sledgehammer where the more delicate corrective tools simply aren't in place. "It seems like they didn't think more deeply than how to use the weapon of accountability," said Eleanor Dougherty, senior associate at the Education Trust, an organization that has promoted "standards-based reform" in DC and other districts.

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OUTSIDE TAKEOVERS: DO THEY WORK?

The Congressional takeover of Washington, DC, schools has so far resembled the takeover scenario in three districts in New Jersey — Jersey City (1988), Paterson (1991), and Newark (1996) — where the state fired the superintendent and upper management and suspended the powers of local elected school officials. New Jersey was the first state to pass laws that permitted this superceding of local authority for reasons other than fiscal management.

While parents of students in poor, run-down schools may have reasons to welcome the intervention of an outside authority, school district takeovers in these and other districts have demonstrated a lack of understanding of the complexity of the task and a lack of respect for those already engaged in the work of education and school reform.

Moreover, there is a sense in these communities that the takeovers are racially motivated and not at all intended to improve the education of students in largely African American and Latino districts. Anna Taliaferro, a long-time activist in Paterson, NJ, whose children attended Paterson schools, calls the takeovers, "diabolical, incredibly racist, with no trickle-down to the children." The interventions are perceived as white, largely suburban, decisionmakers making a heavy-handed power play. A nationwide survey of school district takeovers by the newspaper *Education Week* (January 14, 1998) found that 15 of the 20 current takeovers are in districts with 75% or more students of color.

The New Jersey takeovers were intended to last no more than five years, but to date none of the "state districts" have been returned to local control despite the law's provisions for a gradual return to power by locally elected school boards. DC schools will continue to be subject to US Congressional oversight and authority upon the return of home rule.

Top-down and bureaucratic, rather than "lean" and "entrepreneurial," the takeovers leave parents and teachers with a token role in policy, at best. The phenomenon of turning school district policy-making over to outside administrators and hiring consultants with no roots in the community is described by NCEA co-chair and Paterson high school teacher Stan Karp as "drive-by school reform." In addition, the accompanying push toward privatization of certain school staff (custodians, bus aides, cafeteria workers) pulls down wages and benefits among those most likely to live in the surrounding community and lowers the quality of those services.

In New Jersey's "state districts," there are a few hopeful signs of communities working to rebuild their power. Taliaferro is urging Paterson parents to see themselves as the overseers of the educational system and is helping parents get elected to board and liaison positions. Wilbur Haddock, a Newark education activist, indicates that parents there have no intention of allowing the state to stay in Newark beyond the five-year deadline.

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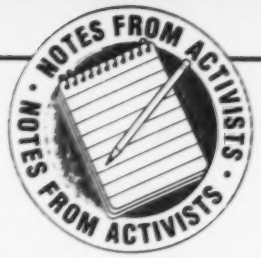

If you'd like to suggest a resource, raise an issue, or discuss a project in this column please contact the NCEA office, P.O. Box 679, Rhinebeck, NY 12572 or via e-mail, rfbs@aol.com. The deadline for the next issue is September 1.

PARENTS AND TEACHERS OF YOUNG CHILDREN GATHER IN BOSTON

Some 60 early childhood educators and parents met in Boston on March 20 to discuss ways to bring together their anti-bias and anti-violence work. In addition they explored the possibility of forming a regional support network.

As a result of the meeting, a coordinating committee was formed to maintain the network and plan future meetings. In addition, a writers' workshop was formed to provide mutual support and assistance for writing, publishing, and otherwise disseminating members' ideas and experiences.

Much of the day was spent in small discussion groups where participants shared the accomplishments and challenges of their daily work as classroom teachers in child care programs and primary schools, teacher educators, parent organizers, college teachers, and community activists.

One of the most exhilarating aspects of the gathering, according to organizer Sheli Wortis, was the opportunity to talk in mixed ethnic/racial groups. Sharing thoughts about how their own cultural backgrounds and early experiences influence the way they work with each other and children, helped participants explore the difficulties of integrating anti-bias and anti-violence work.

The mini-conference was organized with support from NCEA and Wheelock College. In addition to Wortis, organizers included NCEA members Helen McCroskey, Carol Olafajo, and Ellen Wolpert plus Betty Allen and Patti DeRosa. All the organizers are members of the advisory board of the Washington-Beech Anti-Bias Dissemination Project.

Future meetings will include case studies, frameworks for providing feedback on each others' work, discussion of contradictions which arise as participants seek solutions to day-to-day problems of parenting and teaching, and other kinds of education and training. *For details contact Ellen Wolpert at 617-522-8778 or Sheli Wortis, 617-349-6484. For information on the Writer's Workshop, contact Cecelia Alvarado at Wheelock College, 617-734-5200.*

NCEA's 1998 conference (see page 12) will include Anti-Bias Programs for Young Children, a workshop featuring McCroskey, Olafajo, and Wolpert demonstrating techniques and materials tested at Washington Beech PreSchool in Roxbury, MA.

NCEA Mini-Grants

The events described on this page were funded, in part, with NCEA mini-grants. Any NCEA member may propose a local gathering or project. Guidelines appeared in the Spring 1997 issue of Action for Better Schools or contact the NCEA office, 914-876-4580 or rfbs@aol.com.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR SCHOOL REFORMERS

Last summer's popular session, *Community Organizing for School Reformers*, facilitated by Lupe Prieto of the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform and Cate Poe, a consultant with Cross City and the AFL-CIO, was repeated in January in Little Rock.

About 60 middle school parents and school staff associated with ACORN, the Little Rock Classroom Teachers Association, and the New Party participated. Cate and Lupe adapted the session for a project the groups are involved in.

Members and friends of NCEA in Washington, D.C., held a similar session on May 30. Cate and Lupe will also facilitate a 5-hour session at this year's NCEA conference.

Small group discussions at Boston mini-conference of parents and educators on anti-bias, anti-violence projects.

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Entire Steering Committee to Be Elected

NCEA members will elect a steering committee of nine to eleven members at this year's conference in Washington, D.C. In addition, changes in NCEA's bylaws will be voted on at the annual meeting to be held on August 2, the final day of the conference.

The Voting Process

Ballots will be distributed at the conference to members who are in good standing. Anyone renewing their membership at the conference will receive a ballot. Those joining NCEA for the first time at the conference will not be eligible to vote. The label on this issue of *Action* includes the month and year of your last dues payment.

Proposed amendments to the bylaws will be mailed to members in good standing later this summer. The changes are designed to promote effectiveness and efficiency and to align the bylaws with actual practice. Proposed changes were developed by NCEA staff and steering committee members based on experience and conversations held during the 1996 membership retreat. They will be voted on as a package at the annual meeting.

NCEA bylaws provide one vote per individual member and three votes for organizational members. No proxies are permitted. Individuals casting votes for an organization must present notarized authorization on the group's letterhead.

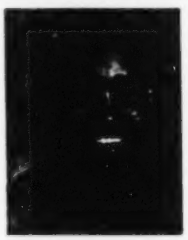
Outgoing SC Members

Many thanks are due to the following members who will be leaving the Steering Committee in August: Linda Christensen, Lola Glover, Richard Gray, Jr., Grainger Ledbetter, Enid Lee, Lilly Lopez, Deborah Menkart, Felicita Morales, and Bob Peterson. Lola and Bob were members of the founding SC and served as co-chairs for several years.

The following current members will stand for re-election; their statements appear below: Bakari Chavanu, Arlene Inouye, Stan Karp, and C. J. Prentiss. Stan and C. J. are current co-chairs.

Candidate Statements

BAKARI CHAVANU



Teacher, Florin High School, Sacramento, CA

As a teacher and new parent, I'm keenly aware that to reform and transform education it's important to build progressive networks linking parents, teachers, administrators, and students committed to change.

As a member of NCEA and its steering committee, I have gained valuable experience working with committed leaders dedicated to coalition building and progressive educational reform. I have actively served on the conference and executive committees and have co-facilitated the African American caucus at the last two conferences. In addition to conducting conference workshops, I have written articles for *Rethinking Schools* and made every effort to follow through on assignments and tasks I undertake.

My goal for NCEA remains the same: to help center our network around anti-racist, anti-sexist, and pro-justice multicultural education. I am committed to building stronger conferences and institutes that bring teachers, parents, and unionists together to exchange ideas, strategies, and experiences that come out of local and national efforts to confront inequities and injustices which are major obstacles for millions of people across race, class, and gender lines.

DONNA GOLD

National Education Association, Washington, DC

NCEA provides an invaluable, dynamic support network of parents, students, teachers, unionists, and others committed to advancing a progressive vision of public education. Not only must this work continue, we must make sure it is advocated by an expanded constituency in order to remain viable.

In my organizational development work for the National Education Association (NEA), I assist school districts to change from hierarchical, rigid organizations to more enlightened, democratic, and effective systems. It is much too rare for schools and unions to reach out in positive and inclusive ways to their own students, parents, and communities.

NCEA has been and must continue to be a leader in changing these relationships and modeling the power of diversity and a passion for social justice. My involvement in NCEA has meant a great deal to me and I view this opportunity to serve on the steering committee as a way to pay back some of what I've received over the past five years.

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ARLENE GALE INOUYE

Community activist and speech and language specialist, Los Angeles (CA) Unified School District

My most important contribution to NCEA is to promote and facilitate positive human relationships. We must continue our dialogue about the unconscious manifestations, unspoken assumptions, and expectations of racism and other "isms." I have learned to speak out for those who experience injustice and inequity. Though my daughter has graduated and I now work for the District, I remain close to parents and the community in which I work, i.e., persons of color in the inner city.

I feel that we are at an important transition time for NCEA. Additional staff have made it possible to expand our work to reach a broader community, parents in particular. We also are learning that geographical, smaller, mini-conferences are more cost-effective and productive. I believe that there are many people who feel the need to be part of a grassroots coalition which addresses educational change from a social justice perspective.

I am committed to what NCEA stands for and will do my part to continue the challenge of defining NCEA in the years to come.

GLORIA INZUNZA-FRANCO

Center for Language Minority Education and Research (CLMER), California State University, Long Beach

I yearn for a time when schools offer challenging academic programs while also addressing language, race, culture, access, and equity issues. My involvement with NCEA has helped me learn, grow, and improve with individuals who share the same awareness and work toward the same dream.

In CLMER's School, Home, Community Collaboration, I work with five middle and high schools to enhance the education of students born outside the U.S. and develop meaningful parent involvement programs. At these schools the number of students preparing for and attending college has risen and more parents participate.

I came to this country from a rural area; arriving here was like landing on a different planet. The schools were dramatically different and offered little support. My struggle for survival — and my family's — began from day one. I developed a keen awareness of my surroundings and a sensitivity to the needs of others. This awareness became a desire to act. Action is needed to initiate change in all arenas, and I made a commitment to convert my dream into a reality.

HAROLD JORDAN

Parent activist, director, Youth and Militarism Project, American Friends Service Committee, Philadelphia, PA

I've been involved in NCEA for three years and participated in two conferences. In '96 I facilitated a workshop and participated in the membership retreat. I value NCEA's emphasis on quality education for all and its commitment to engaging the entire community, not just professionals.

Much of my life has involved public school issues, from my 1960's childhood in newly-desegregated southern schools to my present life as a parent of two kids in public schools. I am a parent activist and chaired a school governance council for several years.

Professionally I coordinate a program in the AFSC's Peace Education unit. One of our central objectives is to challenge growing military involvement in schools and promote pro-youth alternatives that make better use of scarce resources. We work on curriculum, policy, union issues, and community advocacy. I have an extensive background in non-profit management as well.

With the recent expansion of staff and program, NCEA is positioned to develop in new directions. I relish the chance to devote my skills to that process.

STAN KARP

Parent, teacher, Kennedy High School, Paterson, NJ

As an education activist in my classroom, my school, my union, and my community, I know the fight for better education has many fronts. I've been a classroom teacher for 20 years in an urban public high school where I've tried to improve outcomes and achievement for all students. I've worked in my community to eliminate tracking in the high school, and in my union to increase the role of teachers and parents in setting school policy.

I'm also an editor of *Rethinking Schools* and have been active from the beginning in the effort to build NCEA. I've tried to conscientiously fulfill the obligations of being on the steering committee, including serving on the planning committee for the past three conferences and serving as co-chair for the past two years.

If re-elected, I will continue to do my best to build our network and develop it's commitments to anti-racist practice, cross-constituency dialogue, and school reform efforts that are linked to the larger struggle for social justice.

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LINDA MIZELL

Educator, parent, and writer, Cambridge, MA

For much of our collective history, education has been the arena in which we've waged the battle for social justice. Thirty years after the first wave of massive, court-mandated busing in service of desegregation, despite significant demographic changes and the latter-day emphasis on multiculturalism, most schools seem as unprepared to acknowledge and confront the effects of race, class, and language inequities now as they were then.

NCEA takes the social, economic, political, and historical dimensions of education very seriously, and as a steering committee member, I hope to collaborate with others in strengthening NCEA's activist mission. As a coalition, we hold great power and promise; two specific strategies that I plan to focus on are the expansion of the coalition, as well as greater and more productive use of the networks and other resources that our various organizations comprise.

For our collective survival, our goal can be nothing less than total social transformation.

SUSAN NAIMARK

Parent and school committee member, Boston, MA

I became active in public school issues out of necessity as my children went through the ups and downs of the Boston Public Schools for the last 13 years. As I learned that the problems were bigger than my own kids' schools, I got active on our Citywide Parents Council. Last year I was appointed to a 4-year term on the Boston School Committee. This is what I do for fun. My paid work of the last 20 years has been in community development; for the last four years I've worked at YouthBuild USA, a national alternative education/job training/leadership development program for low-income high school drop-outs.

NCEA has been an important source of progressive analysis and support for me. Yet we still have work to do for parents to become equal partners in the organization. I also believe we need a specific strategy to build the political will to adequately support public education. I hope to contribute to NCEA in these areas.

DIANA PORTER

Parent, unionist, high school teacher, Cincinnati, OH

I have taught in the Cincinnati Public Schools for 26 years and am program facilitator of the High School for the Teaching Professions, an urban magnet academy which supports and encourages young people, especially youth of color and/or Appalachian origin, to become teachers.

I am married to a teacher, and we are nurturing our own children through the public schools. After 24 years, I have just left the executive council of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers; I remain active on a district-wide reform oversight committee.

NCEA has affected all of my work. It is an inspiration and a means of accountability as I meet periodically with teachers, parents, and union activists to share and learn. As a founding member, it has been gratifying to watch NCEA grow and change and measure much of my own growth and change by its struggles and accomplishments.

I look forward to serving on the steering committee to help guide the organization bringing new voices to the conversation about educating all children in this country.

C. J. PRENTISS

State representative, Cleveland, OH

I wish to be re-elected to the NCEA Steering Committee. It has been an important personal experience for me. I have learned much in the "hands-on mode" that helps me make better public policy. This experience will be even more crucial to me as Ohio's next black, female, state senator.

NCEA provides a crucial network for those working to improve the education of our children from the grassroots up. In the struggle to improve education, progressive education activists must build broad coalitions. Coalitions are necessary both to defend education from privatization and defunding and to improve education so that all children regardless of race, income, or geography receive a high quality education.

As a progressive elected official, I contribute to NCEA's networking, coalition building, and self-education process. If re-elected I will continue to work hard to help NCEA make a difference for our students, educators, parents, and communities.

NOTE

Lucy Mesa, a parent activist and substitute teacher from Queens, NY, was originally on the slate, but withdrew her name late this spring due to overcommitment.

DC PUBLIC SCHOOLS CRISIS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

Dougherty noted that while the District's schools recently adopted new standards for what students at different grade levels should know, "they have not built in a process where the teachers understand what the standards mean and how that translates into instruction." She questioned whether what is happening every day in classrooms is consistent with the new standards and with the skills the Stanford 9 test measures.

According to its creators, the Stanford 9 test requires students to analyze concepts more than the other exams do. But students in Washington are no longer being given the more demanding "open-ended" sections of the test that require students to write, explain their answers, or show the work they did to get there. This spring, the District opted to use only simpler, fill-in-the-bubble, multiple choice portions of the Stanford 9. According to Monty Neill, an expert on testing who is acting director of FairTest, such tests are problematic because teachers learn what information they need to cover. Student test scores tend to climb during the years in which the exam is repeated, Neill said, then fall sharply when a new version is introduced.

> ***We used to say, "If you want elephants to grow, you don't weigh the elephants. You feed the elephants."*** —ASA HILLIARD

"If you want to reform schools, don't try to do it with testing," Asa Hilliard commented. "We used to say, 'If you want elephants to grow, you don't weigh the elephants. You feed the elephants.' You can weigh all day, every day. The elephants are not going to grow unless they get some food. Children will not grow unless they get some quality instruction."

"School districts that want to appear that they are doing the right thing without a big investment of money and resources simply 'raise the standards' and increase testing," added DC schools activist and NCEA steering committee member Deborah Menkart.

"The administration's plan seems to rest on additional testing and threatening principals and teachers, and this creates an incredibly tense environment for youth and staff," Menkart said. "Fear does not usually promote learning. Instead, we need to be implementing research-based methods for improving student achievement. We should be providing in-depth staff development, a counselor and social worker for every school, smaller class sizes, and books for every student."

The cover story and related articles in this issue of Action *were edited by Paul Socolar, NCEA program associate. They were written by Socolar and Jenice View. Special thanks to Deborah Menkart, Maurice Sykes, Mary Filardo, and Stan Karp for their assistance.*

SIGN ME UP!

NCEA is a membership organization and depends on your participation and support!

☐ **YES,** I want to help build a movement for public schools that serve all children well. Enclosed is my dues check:

☐ $40 (household income over $40,000) ☐ $5 (household income under $15,000)
☐ $20 (household income $25–$40,000) ☐ $100 (organizations)
☐ $15 (household income $15–25,000)

Included with your membership are free samples of the following publications. Please check the ones you'd like to receive.

☐ FairTest Examiner
☐ Philadelphia Public School Notebook
☐ Rethinking Schools
☐ School Improvement Catalog, Community Action for Public Schools/ Center for Law and Education
☐ Teaching for Change: A Catalog of Anti-Racist, Multicultural Curriculum, NECA

☐ **Enclosed** is an additional tax-deductible contribution of: $_____

While supplies last, contributors of $40 or more (not including dues) may select one of the following publications.

☐ *Authentic Teaching, Learning and Assessment with New English Learners at International High School,* Jacqueline Ancess, Linda Darling-Hammond, National Center for Restructuring, Education, Schools, and Teaching (NCREST), 81 pp
☐ *Creating Accountability in Big City School Systems,* Linda Darling-Hammond and Carol Ascher, NCREST, 40 pp
☐ *Funding for Justice: Money, Equity and the Future of Public Education,* a Rethinking Schools publication, 80 pp

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Colonial Status Aggravates DC Schools Troubles

To fully understand the current troubles facing Washington's public schools, one must look not only at the urban disinvestment that has scarred many American cities, but also at the peculiar, colonial status of the District of Columbia.

Governance of DC public schools has been complicated, with responsibility split between the local board of education, the mayor and, more recently, a Congressionally mandated Control Board and its Emergency Board of Trustees that superceded the elected Board of Education. In the end, the US Congress has always had final authority over appropriations — all because two centuries ago the US Constitution granted Congress "exclusive jurisdiction" over the District of Columbia.

Proud History

Some argue that from the first self-help schools for free Blacks in the early 19th century until the 1960s, the education offered in many DC public schools was among the best in the nation. This was particularly true for African American students, despite strict racial segregation and overcrowded Black schools. Public schools were widely used by an economically diverse population and were valued public institutions. Until the 1950s, Washington stood out because most southern states were refusing to finance public secondary schooling for African Americans. In addition, many Ivy League-educated African Americans who were denied employment in other school systems found opportunity in the DC schools. Proximity to Howard University — the first university in the South with the express purpose of biracial education — and other universities also contributed to stronger academic standards.

While DC schools held great appeal for the increasing numbers of Black southern migrants in the first half of the century, they had to overcome ongoing and ineffective Congressional interventions, particularly when any controversy arose. With the 1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing school segregation, Washingtonians took pride in shepherding a "model" transition. But the segregationists in Congress who dominated the District Committee set out to discredit "race-mixing" through incendiary investigations, limited school financing, and resistance to building new schools. Only as the civil rights movement gained momentum nationwide did Congressional oversight of the local schools become harder to justify. In November 1968, DC residents voted for the first-ever elected school board. By 1974, limited home rule was restored to the city's residents as well, for the first time in 100 years.

Flight

By then powerful economic and social forces were undermining urban schools across the country. White flight accelerated in the late 1950s. With the Fair Housing Act, increased access to automobiles and highways, the suburban dream became more widely accessible in the 1960s and 1970s and middle class families, white and Black, left the city. The District's population dropped steadily. The accompanying disinvestment and weak local management created neglect of and disaffection for a school system that had been a source of pride.

In the 1970s and 1980s, local residents maintained a large measure of control over schooling for an increasingly African American, Latino, and low-income school population. However, the popularly elected Board of Education was unable to respond to the changing demographics and deteriorating student performance and school facilities. Even though local officials and administrators controlled educational policy, Congress maintained budgetary oversight and

DON'T THROW THE BABY OUT WITH THE BATH!

Sometimes when we look at education problems, we forget the good things. DC has many students, school staff members, parents, and community activists who work hard and are successful. Lucy Slowe Elementary School is just one example of a DC school that is succeeding. The school has adopted Dr. James Comer's School Development Program. Its philosophy is that any staff member should be willing to put their child in the school; at Slowe about 20% of teachers do so.

All children are reading by the end of third grade, and the school librarian is a central figure. Literacy is a major focus symbolized by the fact that the school's parent center is located in the library. The school uses a whole language approach with interdisciplinary themes. There is no tracking.

Nearly all Slowe's students are African American and 95% are low income. Slowe uses Title I funds for aides and an 11-week Saturday academy; there are no Title I pull-outs. In the 1996-97 Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, Slowe students scored 83% in math, 82% in reading, 72% in science, and 70% in language. The national average for all subjects is 50%.

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authority, which it wielded as a challenge to the local (often novice) policymakers.

In 1989 and then each year until 1995, the Committee on Public Education, a local panel, published comprehensive reports on the status of DC schools, pointing to problems of bloated bureaucracy, low student achievement and dilapidated buildings. The reports and the seeming lack of change in these conditions over six years focused the blame on local governance for the system's ills and contributed to the climate for an outside takeover. In November 1996, Congress finally did take over.

Moving forward

For DC public schools to become a haven of educational excellence for low-income African American and Latino children will require considerable public pressure and a rededication of human, financial, and political resources. Too often advocates and activists have found themselves reacting to Congressionally imposed reforms and get-tough initiatives.

DC activists will need to develop an alternative reform strategy that is both visionary and coherent.

One bright spot in Washington is an emerging coalition of parent activists working to monitor the direction of reform, the school budget and facilities issues.

Another is a successful community organizing effort by the Washington Interfaith Network (WIN) — an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation. DC's Hine Junior High School was owed $81,000 in Title I funds from last school year, money that was "lost" or misspent by the central office.

Hine parents and students, along with WIN leaders, protested at a public forum, demanding the money for their school. They got it, and are now insisting on a district-wide accounting for Title I funds, having discovered 47 other schools in the same boat.

NECA has supported another promising local initiative that is bringing together parent, teacher, and community activists in an alliance aimed at making the schools more child-centered and responsive to the educational needs of their communities. As a first step, trainers from the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform facilitated a session with more than 50 DC activists. They emphasized community organizing techniques and helped activists develop their capacity to affect the direction of change in the DC schools.

NCEA's conference in DC this summer provides another opportunity for local activists to explore new models, approaches and strategies for school change, and other visions of accountability that can counter the get-tough model. *For registration forms, contact the NCEA office at 914-876-4580 or e-mail to rfbs@aol.com; or in Washington, call 202-238-2379.*

LOCAL WASHINGTON GROUPS

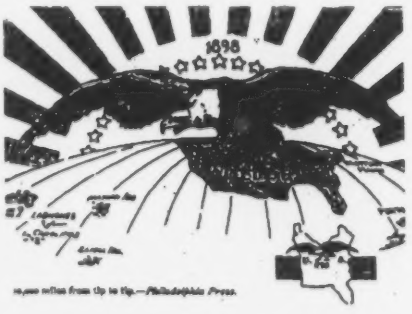
- **NECA** is helping to coordinate efforts to build a coalition of progressive community, parent, and teacher activists. *For more information, contact Deborah Menkart at 202-238-2379.*
- **21st Century Schools Fund** is working to build the capacity and public will to modernize public schools to support quality education and contribute to the revitalization of communities. *Contact Mary Filardo, 202-745-3745.*
- **Parents United** has a long history of making the school budget understandable and holding authorities accountable for how it is spent. *Contact Delabian Rice Thurston 202-833-4766 or Mary Levy, director of the Education Project, Washington Lawyers Committee, 202-835-0031.*
- **The Senior High Alliance of Principals, Presidents, and Educators (SHAPPE)** is a new group that also includes the chairs of several Local School Restructuring Teams. *Contact Cathy Reilly, 202-723-3310.*
- **The Washington Interfaith Network** is holding the central office accountable for Title I monies that should have gone to schools. *Contact Lottie Sneed at 202-518-0815.*

Resistance in Paradise

In 1898 the United States annexed the Pacific islands of Hawai'i, Guam, and Samoa, as well as Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines — altering the course of history for these countries.

Resistance in Paradise: Rethinking 100 Years of U.S. Involvement in the Caribbean and Pacific is a 220-page resource guide for educators, students, and community activists, featuring the peoples of these island nations.

Produced by the American Friends Service Committee and the Office of Curriculum Support of the School District of Philadelphia, Resistance in Paradise contains over 50 lesson plans, role plays, and readings for grades 9 through 12.



After August 1, 1998, single copies will be available for $15, including shipping. To order call 1-888-588-2372. Discounts for orders of five or more.

Debbie Wei and Johnny Irizarry will offer a workshop on issues raised in the book at NCEA's conference in Washington (see back page). Irizarry and Wei are contributors to the guide.

NCEA CONFERENCE: LANGUAGE, RACE, AND POWER IN SCHOOLS

WHO: Parents, school staff, community and union activists, and everyone else who cares about public schools.

WHAT: Collaboration and controversy, debate and discussion, sass and strategy with an emphasis on equity and social justice.

WHEN: Thursday evening, July 30, through Sunday, August 2, 1998.

WHERE: Washington, D.C., Marriott at Metro Center, just blocks from Smithsonian museums, shopping, theaters, and more. To get the conference room rate of $99 per night, you must reserve by July 1. To do so, call the Marriott at 202-737-2200 or fax 202-824-6106 and identify yourself as an NCEA conference participant.

Keynote: Tony Baez, dean of Faculty and Academic Affairs, Eugenio Maria de Hostos Community College, New York, NY.

Special Roundtable Discussion: NEA president Bob Chase (confirmed) and AFT president Sandra Feldman (invited).

Other Presenters and Facilitators: Bakari Chavanu, Michelle.Fine, Luz Guerra, Stan Karp, Herb Kohl, Enid Lee, Elizabeth Martinez, E. Ethelbert Miller, Linda Mizell, Margo Okazawa-Rey, Mothers on the Move, Bob Peterson, Ira Shor, Nan Stein, Beverly Daniel Tatum, Tracey Tsugawa, Debbie Wei, and many others.

For Details and Registration Materials: Phone NCEA, 914-876-4580 or e-mail: rfbs@aol.com. Be sure to provide a postal address.

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